

## **Derek Walcott (1930 —): A New Caribbean Aesthetic**

**I had no nation now but the imagination.  
I met history once, but he ain't recognize me.  
(CP 350)**

**Mohamed Radi(\*)**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, the researcher uncovers a new aesthetic that Derek Walcott, a Caribbean poet, dramatist, writer and recipient of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, adopts in his writings. This is achieved through a thorough analysis of his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) and his poem "The Schooner Flight" which appeared for the first time in the 1979 volume, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. Through these two seminal literary works, the researcher shows how Walcott, unlike his Caribbean contemporaries, views history differently — the thing that eventually leads to the emergence of a new Caribbean aesthetic. "Walcott has long adopted a quizzical stance over the discourse of history, problematizing its function and usefulness. His views, although complex, have remained remarkably consistent over a long career" (Burnett 64). Differentiating between history as time and history as myth, he creates a unique identity for himself and for his people. He does not contemplate the shipwreck as his contemporaries do. The way towards transcendence for the Caribbean writers and people, so Walcott believes, is to resort to who and what they are now, not to their history with its glories and disasters.

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## ديرك ولكوت (1930-): جمالية جديدة في الأدب الكاريبي

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### ملخص

يتناول الباحث بالتحليل والدراسة قصيدة "رحلة مركب شراعي" (1979) ومسرحية حلم فوق جبل القرد (1970) للكاتب الكاريبي الكبير ديرك ولكوت. يرى الباحث أن ولكوت استطاع أن يوجد جمالية جديدة في الأدب الكاريبي من خلال فهمه المختلف للتاريخ حيث يراه على أنه سلسلة من الأساطير التي تُلهم الكتاب، لا الأحداث التي تسجنهم في شباك ماضيها. من خلال هذين العملين نرى ولكوت يتجنب المفاهيم الغربية، والثقافة الإستعمارية؛ بخلاف معاصريه الذين يعتقدون أن هذا يمكن أن يُكسبهم سمعة، وشهرة عالمية. كما أنه يتجنب الوقوع في براثن التاريخ (كأحداث) التي تجعل الكتاب الكاريبيين الآخرين ينتقدون كل ما هو غربي، ويحنون إلى كل ما هو أفريقي، ويجعلون همهم الأول والأخير مجابهة احتقار الكتاب الغربيين المستعمرين للثقافة الأفريقية. لذا فهم يفضلون ما هو أفريقي على ما هو غربي أو أوروبي.

في نهاية قصيدة "رحلة مركب شراعي" يقطع شابين - الشخصية الرئيسية - علاقته بشكل نهائي بماريا التي ترمز إلى أفريقيا، ويؤكد أنها مثل كل البلاد التي يحتويها قلبه، وعقله فيجد نفسه رجلاً أسوداً ينتمي لجزر الهند الغربية ويتكلم الهولندية والأفريقية والإنجليزية: إنه الرجل الذي أنجبته ثقافة ما بعد الإستعمار. وبالمثل تنتهي مسرحية حلم فوق جبل القرد بمشهد رمزي حيث يقوم مكاك - الشخصية المحورية - بقطع القيد الذي يكبل يديه، ويرفع سيفه عالياً ليقطع رأس ربة بيضاء ظهرت له في حلم، وقالت له إنه ليس بعبد أسود بل سليل ملوك أفريقيا وإن عليه أن يعود إلى وطنه الأم أفريقيا لكي يتوّج ملكاً. بهذا نرى أنه شفي تماماً من مرضه فلم يعد يحن إلى أفريقيا؛ كما أنه تخلص من القناع الأبيض الذي كان يحمله، والذي ظن قبل ذلك أنه يحميه ضد العنصرية البيضاء.

Walcott believes that history is functional for the Caribbean cultural identity as long as it is treated as myth, not as time. Instead of attacking the victimizer, he suggests a better way out: a writer should contain the two worlds in himself — the world of the oppressor and the world of the oppressed — and, thus, would contain the two cultures. He himself does this in his writings. “By living the conflict inside himself — that is, inside the individual — Walcott has managed to depoliticize it. He has become able again to look at values with an eye untainted by the struggle for political hegemony and racial domination” (Loreto 46).

The dilemma is: some Caribbean writers imitate the white writers and adopt the western aesthetic which denigrates blacks, that is, portrays them damagingly. They accept the colonial culture and the Western traditions thinking that a colonial canon would make them international. Other writers react differently. They attack the westernized African-Caribbeans and try to derive a purely African aesthetic that counteracts the denigration of Black Caribbeans. Their main target is to stop the widespread contempt for “the values and worthiness of African culture and consequent on-going denigration of continental African culture” (Omotoso 30). They privilege the African connection over the European.

Walcott urges the Caribbeans — people and writers alike — to contemplate their present. If they continue listening to what their history says about the past, this would feed the memory of hero versus victim, and of hatred and revenge. More drastically, it would create negative feelings about the Caribbean self. This is why Walcott contends that history as time is not sequential. The chronological exactness which history has, will not serve any purpose. On the contrary, history would “reel[ing] off absurd, will-crippling images of discoveries and conquests and pacifications and revenge” (*Scars of Conquest* 97).

The other facet of history as myth inoculates the Caribbean people against “this groveling submission to the paralyzing grip of historic time” (*Scars of Conquest* 97). Imagination is the source of this history. Thus, breaks, bridges, continuities and even amnesia are admitted. Walcott’s vision, here, is to avoid nostalgic quests.

Accordingly, his man in this new world of myth is a new Adam who is neither innocent nor naïve.

Walcott creates his own expressive identity apart from the widespread Caribbean aesthetic. Some Caribbean writers have tried to abandon the Western tradition. The best example among them is Edward Brathwaite (1930 —), a leading poet and supporter of the black Caribbean aesthetic. The idea is that Walcott denounces the literature written by the descendants of slaves as they are influenced by the drive to avenge themselves against their masters. Likewise, he rejects the literature written by the scions of those masters as they are deeply influenced by remorse towards the people they occupied for a long time. To unravel the enigma, he points out that when any party succumbs to history as time, the result is:

A literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates into pathos. (Walcott, "The Muse" 24)

Walcott explains that a real aesthetic should not focus on history. Nor should it consider history as "a creative or culpable force" (Walcott, "The Muse" 24). "This shame and awe of history," says Walcott, "possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia" (24). The reference that Walcott makes, here, is to his fellow Caribbean poet Edward Braithwaite — mentioned above — who has kept looking for "a possible alternative to the European cultural tradition which has been imposed upon us and which we have more or less accepted and absorbed, for obvious historical reasons, as the only way of going about our business" (Braithwaite, "The Love" 26). Thus, he adopts a different aesthetic from Walcott's.

According to Walcott, Braithwaite is one of the poets that are enslaved by the concept of history as time. Walcott's contempt for this concept has eventually led him to hate politics, race, Africa and history at large. These are the major themes which constitute

Braithwaite's aesthetic. One more factor that has created this bitterness is the great reception of Braithwaite's poetry — the thing that caused Walcott's to be ignored. What made the situation worse was the flourishing Black Power movement during the 1950's and 1960's which helped poets like Braithwaite to come to the front. "Walcott's bitterness against 'History,' and 'Politics' and 'Race' and 'Africa' increased as did his need to negate Braithwaite's achievement, which he viewed as the mediocre embodied of all these themes" (Gordon Rohlehr 27).

A new tough aesthetic, according to Walcott, is urgently needed. It is the one shared by the descendants of both victim and victimizer. He calls this common ground post-colonialism. "History must be acknowledged, but it must not determine a writer's choices" (Handley 3). These great writers — slave and master, black and white — refuse to be impeded by their history and all the atrocities which history carries. "It is well known that Walcott's way of redressing the damages — and dressing the wounds — of History's perverse memory is to get out of it and into the realm of Art, and to talk poetry instead of politics" (Loreto 47).

What really matters for the Caribbean writers is the aptitude of each for mastering the new situation and naming it anew. In his essay "What the Twilight Says: An Overture," Walcott encourages this capacity of the new poets for adopting the new aesthetic and calls it:

an elemental privilege of naming the new world which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban. They reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man. (32)

Dividing people in the Caribbean islands into Black and White, slave and master, would smash both. Derek is rather eager to create a new world for the blacks and the Caribbeans in particular. He does not want them to fall into the bottomless abyss of debilitating the self and seeing it ugly and abhorrent. His protagonist Makak dramatizes the blacks' dilemma. In *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, this central

character, dramatizes the blacks' dilemma. He is given the name of a monkey as some blacks may see themselves.

Like a monkey, Makak lives in the jungle and on a mountain. He takes his people to the innermost part of his psyche where he uncovers his self-contempt and humiliation:

Is thirty years now I have look in no mirror,  
Not a post of cold water, when  
I must drink,  
I stir my hands first, to break up my image.  
(Walcott, *Dream* 219)

The notion which Makak holds about himself and every black person is fostered by the false superiority which the white man imposes on him. Lestrade, the white antagonist in the play, sees Makak as a monkey in the real sense of the word. This justifies the language Lestrade uses when addressing Makak. It is the language which is often used to train and domesticate wild animals. He orders him to stand, sit, turn...etc. Lestrade finds what supports his behavior in the law designed by the whites.

The White Law views blackness as the opposite of all positive attributes. Back in his homeland, Makak's behavior is governed and regulated by the law of the jungle, the stinking zoo where he and the black people live. Thus, Makak is reduced to a cog in a machine where his humanity is underestimated and depreciated. He is a robot that has no say in whatever it is ordered to do. Astonished, Lestrade remarks: "Everything I say to this monkey does do / I don't know what to say this monkey won't do" (Walcott, *Dream* 223).

Walcott in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* does not project the clashing differences between Black and White; he brings both into question to end the unjustifiable struggle and to view the relationships between the two repellent poles anew. He tries to create a new world which is inhabited by a new Adam that is not obsessed with the superiority of the White or tormented with the inferiority of the Black: An Adam that is not history-bound.

To help end the hallucination and fascination Blacks have about their dreamland, Africa, and live in harmony with themselves and with the other, Makak sees in one of his dreams a white goddess who hugs him and tells him he has a royal ancestry in Africa. He awakes and

describes the morning of that sweet dream as the morning of resurrection. Now, his positive feelings towards Africa are heightened and begin to believe that Makak is not his real name. "She say," he exclaims, "I should not live so any more here in the forest, frighten of people because I think I ugly. She say that I come from the family of lions and kings" (Walcott, *Dream* 236).

The dream helps Makak to cross the border between nonentity and a full entity, that is, a king. He goes back to Africa and his disillusionment starts. He begins to view Africa in new terms. It is not the idealized continent he has dreamt of. Nor are the people there united and harmonious. This shock causes Makak to abandon his history and his origin as well as the so called royal ancestry.

What matters most in Walcott's standpoint, is his ability to live in the new world where black and white are neither in the foreground nor in the background. Makak is fully cured from his psychological illness. He does not yearn to Africa anymore. He does not have any color complex, either. The mask of whiteness is no more a protective shield for Makak to use against inferiority. He finally restores his lost self, and bids farewell to his African history.

The play ends with a symbolic scene where Makak's spiritual enslavement towards and oscillation between Blackness and Whiteness ends. He removes the robe that pinions his hands and raises his chopper high in the air. He cuts off the white goddess's head:

Makak: (Removing his robe) Now, O God, now  
I am free. (He holds the curved sword in both  
hands and brings it down. The WOMAN is  
beheaded).

(Walcott, *Dream* 320)

Here, the message which the play proposes is very conspicuous. Walcott wants the Caribbeans to forget about Africa and Africanness. "The ultimate message in the play is for us [Caribbeans] to shed the African longing" (Walcott, "the Muse" 2). Thus, Walcott rejects the aesthetic that views Africa as Eden. This is why he offers Makak the chance to be fully recovered and disillusioned over this Edenic notion:

This discovery places the Caribbean Negro at  
crossroads. Escape from the poverty and

drudgery of the Caribbean is desirable, but even if it were possible, the question is: escape to what? With this realization that Africa may well be just another quandary, Makak's soul (representing that of the Caribbean generally) is freed from the throes of yearning for the fantastic and unattainable. The new Caribbean resolve can be inferred from the play. It is to remain Caribbean, not black or white, but red, cinnamon or mulatto, to stop the pursuit of illusion. (Olorunjoba-Oju 19)

The same new Caribbean aesthetic is tangible in Walcott's poem "The Schooner Flight." "In its interweaving of personal and communal themes and story, the poem re-enacts, freshly and trenchantly, Walcott's quarrel with history" (Baugh 109). Shabine, the poem's protagonist, dives into the sea in order to find an origin for himself and for the Caribbeans at large. Deep in the sea, he is incapable of seeing one unified origin. Different origins are mixed together. The view for Shabine is blurred:

So choke with dead  
That when I would melt in emerald water,  
Whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,  
I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea-fans,  
Dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.  
I saw that the powdery sand was their bones  
Ground white from Senegal to San Salvador.  
(CP 349)

The "corals" are no real corals. They are the ground bones of many people who come from different nations. They are the bones of the people who come from Senegal and from San Salvador as well as the countries in between. All bones are gathered in the bottom of the sea and are turned into powder, that is, they are no more indicative of any origin. Here, the living cannot live as the sea is controlled by the dead. That is to say, no communication can be established between the living and the dead; the present cannot be reconnected or interpreted through the past. The bones are, also, reminiscent of history which cannot be retrieved, either.



Again, the bones are mixed. Were it possible for Shabine to trace back his origin, he would not find one unified history. He would not distinguish the bones of his people from the bones of others. History is obtruded into Shabine's consciousness to help him achieve transcendence through putting history aside and living forward. Thinking of past glories would take him down.

Shabine remembers his far-off homeland with nostalgia. He assumes that "Maria Concepcion was all my thought" (CP 346). Here, Maria symbolizes Africa. Shabine's attachment to her is, in fact, an attachment to an origin that claims him, and gives him a place in history and a position among other nations. He torments and lashes himself that he has abandoned his beloved Maria:

The pain in my heart for Maria Concepcion,  
the hurt I had done to my wife and children,  
was worse that the bends, In the rapturous deep  
there was no cleft rock where my soul could  
hide.

like the boobies each sunset, no sand bar of light  
where I could rest. (CP 349)

Shabine's internal suffering is heightened in the last three lines above where he cannot find a cure for his perplexing and restless life in a place which he believes is not his.

In Shabine's point of view, Maria represents a dead past, a past incapable of rebirth and regeneration. A good future for Shabine cannot be born out of Maria's womb. He tries to abandon her for he believes that his love for her divides him "from [my] children, the flesh of my flesh" (CP 349). He cannot fully integrate with his fellow Caribbeans on the island. After all, the Africans are not better than the White Europeans dominating the Caribbean Islands. He cannot integrate with them easily:

I had no nation now but the imagination.  
After the white man, the niggers didn't want me  
When the power swing to their side.  
The first chain my hands and apologize,  
"History";

The next said I wasn't black enough for their  
pride.

(CP 350)

It is the same dilemma that the speaker voices in "A Far Cry from Africa," another poem, where his irreconcilable sides tear his psyche apart. He is at mess, and thinks he is unable to find rest or peace for his tormented soul:

The gorilla wrestles with the superman.

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I  
love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live? (CP 18)

Like this speaker, Shabine has divided loyalties towards Africa with its rich cultural heritage and the English language with its literary tradition. His hybridism works like poison in his blood. He is depressed that his blood is not pure. In other words, he feels depressed and alienated and, thus, cannot easily identify with any of them.

Walcott heightens Shabine's dividedness which is best captured in the following scene where the living await the dead at the graveyard thinking they would come back to life. Like Samuel Beckett's *Godot*, they never come:

I knew when dark-haired evening put on

Her bright silk at sunset, and, folding the sea,

Sidled under the sheet with her starry laugh,

That there'd be no rest, there'd be no forgetting.

Is like telling mourners round the graveside

About resurrection, they want the dead back . . .

So I smile to myself as the bow rope untied

And the Flight swing seaward: "Is no use  
repeating

that the sea has more fish . . . ." (CP 346 - 47)

Like Makak, Shabine has a vision in which God shows him the best way out of his ordeal:

so I got raptures once, and I saw God  
like a harpooned grouper bleeding, and a far  
voice was rumbling, "Shabine, if you leave her,  
if you leave her, I shall give you the morning  
star.  
if you leave her, I shall give you the morning  
star."

(CP 349 - 50)

The "morning star" stands for Shabine's rebirth as a citizen free from the dilemma of origin and history, a cosmopolitan citizen. To get "the morning star," Shabine follows the advice of his "bleeding" God, and tries other women, that is, other nations, to choose one of them as a good substitute for his in order to end his struggle:

When I left the madhouse I tried other women  
But, once they stripped naked, their spiky cunts  
Bristled like sea-eggs and couldn't dive. (CP 350)

Shabine's spiritual healing begins when he sees in his dream vision the slave ships of the Middle Passage — the time when millions of Africans were transported across the Atlantic to the New World as part of the slave trade — where his African ancestors are far below the deck of these ships. He calls upon them in an attempt to achieve reunion with them. Unfortunately, no one answers him. The distance between the two of them is great; connection cannot be established. More importantly, he questions his relatedness to them: Shabine attributes his failure to establish any relationships with the surrogate nations to his God. He cannot find a nation that he can surely name his. He interrogates his God:

Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,  
our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose  
to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who  
knows  
who his grandfather is, much less his name?  
Tomorrow our landfall will be the Barbados.  
(CP 353)

Shabine's doubt towards his slave ancestors enunciates and obliterates the idea of racial purity. The relations that connect him to the African ancestors were cut off during the Middle passage. This, in turn, makes him the West Indian African he is; a hybrid that enhances all cultures which he encounters, and, thus, he is a rich human being.

Where is my rest place, Jesus? Where is my  
harbour?

Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for,  
And the window I can look from that frames my  
life?

(CP 350)

In the last section of "The Schooner Flight" which Walcott entitles "Out of the Depths," Shabine achieves transcendence. In this section, Maria marries the sea and vanishes in its deep waters:

There's a fresh light that follows a storm  
While the whole sea still havoc; in its bright  
wake

I saw the veiled face of Maria Concepcion  
Marrying the ocean, then drifting away  
In the widening lace of her bridal train  
With white gulls her bridesmaids, still she was  
gone.

(CP 360)

Here, Shabine's attachment to Maria breaks, and a new Shabine with a new world, life and future, emerges. He begins to see ahead, and to know who and where he is. What matters most for Shabine from that point on, is the new world which he creates for himself. He is no more torn asunder between two conflicting poles, with none claiming him. He eventually calls his search for his roots as:

vain search for one island that heals with its  
harbour

and a guiltless horizon, where the almond's  
shadow

doesn't injure the sand. There are so many  
islands!

As many islands as the stars at night

On that branched tree from which meteors are  
shaken

Like falling fruit around the schooner Flight.

(CP 361)

Shabine comes to the conclusion that “earth is one island” and, thus, his search is unjustifiable. Earth as a whole is his home, his place and his nation. Human beings, white, black, yellow are all alike and are his brothers in humanity.

In the last five lines concluding the poem, “The Schooner Flight,” Walcott assures himself and his readers that he is a new man in a new world, a world which is free from prejudices and discrimination, a world that welcomes all and rejects none. Now, he knows his way well:

Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam

As the deck turn white and the moon open

A cloud like a door, and the light over me

Is a road in white moonlight taking me home.

Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea.

(CP 361)

Shabine does not sing a personal song in the lines above. He sings a communal one; a song for his Caribbean people and for everyone else having the same situation of dividedness. He manages to break his long engagement to his African forefathers, and to achieve transcendental detachment.

Finally, Shabine is given “the morning star” and is fully restored and metamorphosed into a new Adam. He is “blest with a virginal unpainted world, with Adam’s task of giving things their names” (CP 294). His Maria is no more than an island among the “so many islands” he has in mind and heart. Shabine himself has assimilated all the cultures around and, thus, has become “a nation.” He is a West Indian Black man who has “Dutch, nigger, and English in [me]” (CP 346). “So when Shabine makes his now celebrated statement of identity . . . he stakes a claim not only for himself as individual, but also for the West Indian people; that they are indeed a nation, a people in the true sense of the word, and that hybridity and heterogeneity are key factors of their integrity as nation and people”

(Baugh 109-110). Shabine eventually finds a way out of “his irreconcilable and pluralistic situation as a transplanted African in a colonial English society” (Balakian 45).

Through his poetry and drama, Walcott confounds the distinctions that exist between the victimizer and the victim. He creates a new post-colonial aesthetic which “obliterates the distinctions between ‘victim’s literature’ and its supposed opposite” (Ramazani 415). He is against the “aesthetic separatism blind to the webbed history of the Caribbean, of his ancestors, and of his imagination and hostile to the cross-racial and cross-historical identifications the New World offers” (Ramazani 415).

Walcott synthesizes a new authentic aesthetic which is purely Caribbean in character and which would, as Nana Wilson-Tagoe puts it, “neither explain nor forgive history” (129). It is the aesthetic that exposes the Caribbean situation and the day-to-day realities of the Caribbean life. Now, Walcott can “locate himself within both a regional and international poetics” (MacDonald-Smythe 92). He is like the turtle which, mobile in its shell, wanders the global seas and, thus, pleads with “Earth-heart”:

if I must go,  
make of my heart an ark,  
let my ribs bear  
all, doubled by  
memory, down to the emerald fly  
marrying this hand, and be  
the image of a young man on a pier,  
his heart a ship within a  
ship within a ship, a bottle  
where this wharf, these  
rotting roofs, this sea,  
sail, sealed in glass. (CP 250)

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